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ABSTRACT

In October 1999, the Regional Australia Summit was held in Canberra to allow people from regional, rural, and remote areas to contribute their perspectives on the challenges facing rural Australia. The Summit aimed to develop a national appreciation of those challenges, gather ideas on meeting the challenges, establish goals, and identify roles for government and the corporate and community sectors in achieving those goals. Working groups explored 12 major themes, including communications, infrastructure, health, community well-being, aspects of economic development, community leadership, and education and training. Participants came from all parts of Australia and included a reasonable gender balance and significant Indigenous and youth participation. The key message delivered by participants was that rural Australians want to shape their own futures, drawing on partnerships between communities, government, and business. Other important points were that: there are no easy solutions to rural community problems; all stakeholders must make their various contributions to locally developed plans within the regional context; successful communities have reinvented themselves and capitalized on their natural strengths and assets; significant investments are needed in education, training, skill development, and leadership to develop the human capacity of rural Australia; the productive capacity of rural landscapes must be restored and maintained; rural communities need affordable, reliable access to telecommunications; Indigenous people are stakeholders in rural Australia; and government has the responsibility to provide and maintain basic community infrastructure. Recommendations for public policy are listed. (SV)

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The Regional Australia Summit: An Inclusive Approach To Policy Development

Linda Holub, Australia

This paper describes the development and conduct of the Regional Australia Summit held in October 1999. The Summit was a national event initiated by the Deputy Prime Minister. It provided an opportunity for a cross-section of people from regional, rural, remote areas to contribute their views and perspectives on how the challenges facing those parts of Australia could be addressed.

The paper provides background on the Summit including information on the type and range of participants, aims and objectives and the key theme areas. It also reports on the outcomes of the Summit, including key priorities and strategies identified by participants, and describes the process that has been established to follow-up on the Summit outcomes. The paper provides a current picture of the needs of regional Australia as identified by people from the grass roots.

Background

At his National Press Club speech in February 1999, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson, MP (Anderson, 1999) spoke of his concern that in much of rural and regional Australia there is a deep and palpable sense of alienation, of being left behind, of no longer being recognised and respected for the contribution being made to the nation. He also expressed concern that Australia was at risk of splitting into two nations.

John Anderson went on to announce that he would convene a summit, to address the difficulties and challenges facing rural and regional Australia. The Summit was held from 27-29 October 1999, at Parliament House in Canberra. The aim of the Summit was to develop a partnership between the government, business and community sectors to deliver a better future for regional, rural and remote areas that are facing significant change. The objectives of the Summit were to:

- develop a national appreciation of the challenges facing regional Australia;
- gather ideas on how these challenges can be met;
- establish a series of goals for Regional Australia; and
- identify the roles that government, the corporate and community sectors should take in achieving these goals.

Australia, like many other countries is dealing with the enormous changes occurring in society, partly related to technological change and globalisation. The issues raised in the National Press Club speech by the Deputy Prime Minister indicated a concern for some of these longer-term and structural issues facing the country. In the political process, these longer-term objectives are often at odds with short term election cycles. In a fairly bold and risky move, he was prepared to test a creative and very public mechanism to ensure an inclusive approach to these challenges. In addition, his objectives for the Summit illustrate that he was prepared to challenge the traditional roles of each of the sectors in dealing with major public policy issues. As outlined later in the paper, the engagement of the corporate sector was a key element in this approach.

Summit Themes

The major themes explored at the Summit through specific working groups were:

- communications,
- infrastructure,
- health,
- community well-being and lifestyle,
- government – local, state, federal,
- finance and facilitating entrepreneurship,
- value adding to regional communities and their industries,
- new industries and new opportunities,
- community and industry leadership,
- education and training,
- philanthropy and partnerships, and
- sustainable resource management.

Participants

Participation in the Summit was by invitation only. A Reference Group was established to advise the Minister on participants. The Reference Group attempted to obtain a broad mix of participants across all parts of Australia, across relevant industry sectors as well as the community sector. It also attempted to achieve a reasonable gender balance and significant indigenous and youth participation. Representatives from state, territory and local governments were also invited. Over 600 nominations and expression of interest were received.

There were a total of 282 delegates to the Summit. This number included some 50 high level attendees who were specifically invited to a concurrent meeting. This group

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included Federal Cabinet Ministers, chief executive officers from Australia's major companies and political leaders from the States and Territories. The strategy here was to focus attention at the highest level across all sectors on the issues in Regional Australia and build support for the notion of a partnership response.

Public servants and politicians were not formal delegates. The two portfolio Ministers attended the Summit but indicated they were there to listen and learn. Their speeches were restricted to opening and closing remarks.

A web-site was also established prior to the Summit with all background papers and other information about the Summit being made available. During the Summit itself, the website was hot-linked to the public broadcaster's (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) website, where the plenary proceedings were audio streamed live and papers were put on the site immediately. The site proved to be very popular with 11,500 pages requested from the site during the week of the Summit and a further 8,900 PDF documents downloaded during October and 10,380 PDF downloaded during November.

A free call phone and fax and electronic mail 'Solutions Line' was also established to provide more people with the opportunity to contribute their answers and solutions to the challenges facing regional Australia. These lines operated in the week leading up to and during the Summit. The input was analysed daily and was provided to delegates.

Theme Working Groups

Working groups were established in the 12 theme topics (outlined above) and over 8 hours of the program was devoted to working group time. Background papers were commissioned in each topic area and were circulated to all attendees. Facilitators were engaged to work with each of the working groups. They were experienced facilitators who also had some content knowledge in their particular theme area. Their remit was to act as agents to stimulate discussion on the specific theme between members of the working group and to ensure that working groups used the opportunity provided by the Summit to develop clear and concrete priorities and strategies. Not unexpectedly, the extent to which this occurred was variable.

Outcomes

The Summit was a high-risk political strategy. There was concern that it would raise expectations as to what the Federal Government could deliver. Responsibility for addressing the issues raised varies across jurisdictional boundaries between Federal and state local governments. There was also a concern that the Summit would provide a very public venting about the Government's role and commitment to regional Australia.

What became very evident at the welcome reception was a very palpable positive and up-beat atmosphere. While many participants saw this as only one step along the way, they also recognised the significant opportunity being provided to them to influence government decision-making.

A small working party of Summit participants was established to develop the Summit Communiqué (1999). It was headlined: "REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIANS WANT TO DETERMINE THEIR OWN FUTURES"

This summarised the key message that was delivered by participants. The Communiqué went to say, "Delegates to the Regional Australia Summit agreed that regional (including rural and remote) Australians want to shape their own futures. This should be in a journey of partnership. The Summit acknowledged that regional Australians have a long and proud history of adaptability and creativity. However, to respond to the opportunities of the next millennium and the many challenges currently confronting regional Australia, the Summit has agreed that new partnerships now need to be forged among Governments, business and communities – all of whom have to play their part.

The Summit called for the new partnership to be based on respect – renewed respect for regional Australia on the part of urban Australians".

The Communique outlined the outcomes to emerge from the Summit deliberations and given the mix of participants probably reflects reasonably well current thinking in regional areas of Australia. The key points were that:
"There are no easy solutions to the problems facing regional Australia. These problems are shared by many countries.
Community development will not happen without government, business and community stakeholders each making their various contributions towards locally developed plans within a regional context.
Communities that have re-invented themselves have identified and capitalised on their natural strengths, resources and self-interest to enhance their environmental assets and generate economic and social development.

Communities want to share responsibility with government for development of their regions. Communities don't want solutions imposed on them. One size does not fit all.
Government, industries and communities must invest significant ongoing resources in skilling, learning, education and training, and leadership to develop the human capacity of regional Australia. Communities want to include and invest in their youth.
One of the most extraordinary assets of regional Australia is our unique natural environment, a natural heritage that is

a rich and evocative element of our national identity. The Summit recognises that mistakes have been made in the management of the natural resources, which contribute so much to our current wealth and quality of life. All Australians share a responsibility to restore the productive capacity of our rural landscapes for the benefit of current and future Australians.

Governments, industries and communities must ensure affordable, reliable access to telecommunications

Indigenous people are stakeholders in regional Australia.

Governments must accept responsibility for facilitating adequate provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure.

Governments, urban business and industry must become more responsive to the unique requirements of sectors and areas of regional Australia in designing and delivering programs and services.

- The three tiers of governments must remove unnecessary regulatory impediments, which increase the cost of doing business and stifle innovation and action in regional Australia.
- Governments must create a climate, including tax incentives, which encourages investment for rural enterprise and philanthropy.
- Key business leaders expressed their support for the idea of partnerships but sought commitment from the Federal Government to "take some risks" which would assist business, rather than create barriers that serve to hinder private sector investment in regional Australia. Their view was that tax incentives were a crucial factor in attracting investment to areas outside the major metropolitan areas".

Each group identified 4-5 key priorities, major issues and challenges and proposed strategies to address these. They also identified what players need to be involved to implement the strategies. Approximately 250 specific strategies were recommended by the groups and presented to the plenary by the facilititors on the last morning of the Summit.

Post-Summit Implementation

At the conclusion of the Summit, the Deputy Prime Minister announced the establishment of the Regional Australia Summit Steering Committee to develop a plan for implementing outcomes from the Summit. The Steering Committee is comprised of attendees at the Summit and includes a range of community, church, indigenous, and academic representatives from around the country. The Steering Committee has been asked to take a stewardship role in carrying forward and ensuring action on the Summit deliberations and to work to deliver the outcomes identified by the Summit.

Vision For Regional Australia

Since the Summit, the Steering Committee has developed an implementation plan. In this plan, it identified a Vision that is guiding the thinking and work of the Committee and will be commended to the Government and other stakeholders as providing an inspirational goal, which they should embrace. This Vision is for: *A strong and resilient regional Australia which has the resources, recognition and skills to play an equal role in building Australia's future and is able to turn uncertainty and change into opportunity and prosperity*

In developing advice on a comprehensive strategy for responding to the outcomes from the Regional Australia Summit, the Steering Committee has been guided by the following principles:

- governments, businesses and communities have a joint responsibility to address the problems facing regional Australia and should work together in a spirit of partnership;
- a "bottom up" rather than a "top down" approach should be built into responses aimed at empowering communities at the local level;
- responses should be sufficiently flexible to cater for the particular circumstances and needs of regional, rural and remote communities.

The Steering Committee has argued that changes brought forward must deliver economic and business development, equity of service access in regional communities and community empowerment.

The Committee is also reviewing the recommendations to make sure that proposals it recommends meets the need for:

more flexibility to meet the unique circumstances and needs of individual communities;

- improved access to government assistance programs.
- improved access to services from government, business and other organisations;
- closer co-ordination between the different levels of government;
- national strategies or minimum standards;
- new government mechanisms or processes;
- improved information and communication;
- options to stimulate business investment in regional Australia;
- improved human resource development including education and training,;
- leadership development and building of community capacity;
- the provision of physical infrastructure critical to community development or local industry development.

The next phase of the Committee's activities will see it focus on the engagement of stakeholders beyond

government, including the corporate and community sectors and the development of partnerships that could see the take-up of Summit recommendations that go beyond of the role of government.

The Committee has undertaken to report to Summit delegates and other interested stakeholders in May and October of this year on progress.

Regional Australia Summit Taskforce

The Federal Government has also established a Taskforce comprising Secretaries of all relevant Federal Government portfolios. This will ensure that the response to the Summit will be coordinated on a whole-of-government basis. The Taskforce has a focus on activities within the Federal government while the Steering Committee has a broader focus. The two groups nevertheless are working closely together to refine and develop policy ideas and options arising from the Summit for presentation to the Government reports will also be made available.

Conclusion

The Regional Australia Summit tested an unusual process at a national level to develop policies and programs sympathetic to regional Australia. This approach was very much in keeping with the message being delivered by rural and regional communities, that is, that people living in regional areas know their problems and should be empowered to develop and implement appropriate solutions. From a policy perspective it has provided for a creative mix of priorities and strategies. While there was some inherent danger in facilitating such a large and public method of policy-making, it was been useful in raising the profile of regional issues at a national level and in sensitising the bureaucracy to these issues. The mechanisms established to follow-up the Summit recommendations have also been substantive. At the time of writing, it is not possible to evaluate the final product, but many delegates and commentators have acknowledged that the test of the process will be in the Government's response to the recommendations.

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